

[I Wanted to be a Merchant]

I WANTED TO BE A MERCHANT

A Depression Victim Story

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I WANTED TO BE A MERCHANT

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"The past few years have brought many changes in my way of living." John Robson said thoughtfully. "But all of these readjustments came after I had realized my lifelong ambition of coming to the city as a merchant.

"I was born and reared out in the country, where the sun shines brighter, the air is purer and where one gets in closer touch with nature and God. My father's farm was located near Louisville, a former capital of Georgia, which prior to the War Between the States was a great slave market. The old covered stand from which the slaves were sold is still standing in the center of the square. One of the town's civic organizations has beautified the old relic by surrounding it with flowers and shrubbery.

"My father and mother owned the farm. There were five children, three boys and two girls. Only two of us are living now - one sister and myself.

"I don't recall anything very eventful or exciting during my childhood on the farm. I helped my father and my brothers with the farm work and did chores around the house. The principal event of the week was dressing up in my Sunday clothes and going to Sunday school and "preaching," which was held once a month.

"Of course, the young boys and girls' had some social gatherings. In fact, we always had a get-together after Sunday school. There were really not many other opportunities for seeing the young people.

"All during my boyhood my ambition was to get grown and go to a city and become a merchant. Fame and fortune kept constantly calling me to the bright city lights. When I was 21 years old I launched out for Augusta and got me a job as clerk with a retail grocery store at a salary of \$10 a month.

"Wanting to be near me, my father and mother moved to Augusta and opened up a boarding house. Thus I was able to continue to live with them.

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"After one year the firm doubled my salary and I stayed with them for another year. Then I received an offer from a wholesale and retail grocery company which carried a salary of \$45 per month. I worked on this job for seven years. Then I resigned without hesitation at the end of that period to accept a position with another grocery concern which would pay me \$85 a month. I worked at that salary for two years.

"By this time I had saved a little and was making a fair salary. I went to Thomson, Georgia, married the girl of my dreams and brought her to Augusta. The firm raised my salary to \$100 a month and we were getting along very nicely. Our 3 happiness was short-lived, however, for my wife died within less than six months after we were married.

"I stayed in the same position for several years longer until in 1921 I accepted a job that paid me \$125 a month. I worked for this grocery firm for seven years, during which time I re-married. My second wife had some money of her own and being very economical and thrifty she managed to accumulate quite a nice savings account. Another offer from a grocery firm with a \$50 increase came at this time and for the two ensuing years I received \$175 a month for my services.

"my wife had continued to save and after several years she had quite a nice nest egg in the bank. It amounted to about \$18,000. With this and my good salary we felt that we were very comfortable indeed.

"Then along came a man named Johnson, who had previously operated a grocery business. He asked me to enter into a partnership with him on a 50-50 basis, each of us to put up a certain amount of cash. My wife did her best to get me to reject his proposition but after several conversations with him he over-persuaded me and I consented.

"In 1930 we opened a wholesale and retail grocery business under the firm name of Robson and Johnson. Our capital stock amounted to about \$10,000, including fixtures, etc. The first year our sales amounted to \$125,000, and the business continued 4 to prosper

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for several years. My partner looked after the office, bookkeeping, making deposits, etc., and my wife duties were to look after the buying, the stock, and the sales.

"I had complete confidence in Johnson and left all of the financial part of the business to him. It took three years for me to realize what a terrible mistake I had made for, when I did examine our affairs the firm had become heavily involved. I exerted every effort to pull out of the hole we were in. I, personally, borrowed \$2,100 but it wasn't long before I realized that in spite of this we were going further and further in debt. We were finally forced into a receivership. I then persuaded the Miller Brothers to buy out the business which they did in May 1935. They changed the name of the firm and retained me as manager for two and a half years. At the end of that time one of the Brothers became dissatisfied with the return on his investment and they decided to close out the business.

"There I was, left high and dry without even a job. After a short time I secured employment with one of our large cotton firms. They paid me \$20 a week for one year. At this point the government took charge of the cotton situation, with a resultant general slowing up of the cotton business and my salary was reduced to \$15 a week.

5

"The long seige of worry and trouble had taken its toll and my health began to fail. I was compelled to undergo an operation on my leg.

The trouble was caused by varicose veins. Of course this hampered as and as I was unable to get out in the country and collect bad accounts as I had always done, I lost out altogether.

"Then the depression really got in its work for as I was unable to meet the payments on my home, which was valued at \$8,000, I soon lost it. We moved to a downtown apartment and we are still living there.

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"My come-back has been only nominal, but despite being handicapped by a lame leg, I am selling merchandise on a commission basis. My income is sufficient to support myself and my wife and the two boys whom we have practically adopted.

"We have been able to even save a little money, for my wife never lost her thrifty ideas. After my health became involved we decided to go on one of the personally conducted Canadian tours.

"We left Augusta by train. The rest of the party had left the day before and gone to Savannah. They were going by boat to some seaport along the way. We didn't feel that I could stand the water trip, so we waited and joined the rest of the party later.

"We spent a day and a night at the National Capital, then 6 went on to Philadelphia, and on to Atlantic City. Then we went back to Philadelphia and took the train for New York City. Next we sailed up the Hudson River to Albany and from there we entrained for Niagara Falls where we spent a day. From the Falls we went to Toronto, Canada. Then we took the train for Buffalo, New York. As we had been away from home for 26 days, we felt that it was long enough and so we started back to Augusta.

"It was really a wonderful trip and a very inexpensive one. We bought two tickets for \$196 apiece. I had \$35 in my pocket, and I went down and drew \$300 out of the bank, six 50-dollar bills.

"We soon found that everything was planned so completely that it would be unnecessary to spend any of our money except for the personal things that we might wish to buy. We didn't even break one of the 50-dollar bills we had drawn from the bank.

"During our stay at Washington, D. C., we were registered at the Chaselton Hotel. After we had lunch we inquired of the clerk at the desk if he knew anything or the whereabouts of Colonel Clark, who had been stationed at bus Augusta Arsenal for a number of years, but had been transferred to Washington. Without hesitation, the clerk informed us that

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we would find the 7 colonel almost directly across the street at the George Washington Hospital. We went over immediately to call on him.

“During his assignment at the Augusta Arsenal, his family and mine had became very good friends, but we hadn't heard from them for a number of years. He gave us a very hearty welcome. Then he called his wife over the telephone and told her to come down as soon as she could, that he had a very pleasant surprise for her and that she must be sure and bring the car along. Mrs. Clark arrived in a remarkably short time and after exchanging greetings, they drove us all over the city. We enjoyed it to the fullest.

“My wife and I were never had any children of our own but, in the course of our wedded life we have partially raised and educated 10 children, and of them relatives of ours. Four of these children were brothers who had lost their mother at a very tender age and for a number of years their father had drunk heavily. Since that time he has stopped drinking and has married again. However, we still have two of these boys and, as I said before, we have practically adopted them.

“When the four brothers I have already mentioned were making their home with us, two of them have us quite a bit of trouble. They used to run away and get into petty difficulties, 8 etc., causing us a lot of anxiety and quite a nice sum of money. When their father lived with us and drank so much, we were greatly embarrassed at times, and paid out lots of money trying to keep him out of trouble.

“This man was a splendid shoes salesman and could get a job almost any time he wanted one. However, when pay day come around he would almost invariably get drunk and in this way he lost many a good job.

“I recall one instance when he went to Atlanta and got in jail. He sent for me immediately. I went up and got him out on bond and employed a lawyer for him. This lawyer charged me \$150.00 when I employed him and another \$150.00 in a few days. I considered this very

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unfair. Another lawyer, a friend of mine from Augusta who was visiting in Atlanta, told me that it was illegal, and that I should demand half of my money back.

“Before I even got to see the man he lost his life when his home burned down. The chances of my getting my money back burned up with it as I had no way to prove that he had gotten it from me.

“During all the years of misfortune and depression, my wife's courage and faith had never failed. She met each now trial with great fortitude and cut her garment to suit the cloth she had. She is always bright and cheerful. Sometimes I get a little despondent, but she always manages to lift me up again. We lost our nice home and are now living in a rented apartment, but we have learned to be thankful that we can have a fairly good living.”

“Do you hold membership in any of our fraternal orders or clubs, Mr. Robson?” I asked.

“No.” He replied. “I have never joined any clubs or lodges because I have been a very busy man, and in the days when I could have done things like that, my work kept me closely confined at my store.”

“But you are a church member?” I inquired.

“Oh, yes,” he answered. I have been a member of the Methodist Church for years and I have endeavored to be a good one. I have also given as [?] to charity as my income would permit, and you may rest assured that every merchant on Broad Street has many and varied calls for money.

“I am also a member or our Bible class and am intensely interested in the work they are doing.

“I never missed a Sunday until my health began to fail to such an extent that walking became difficult and the use of a stick imperative.”

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"Did I understand you to say that you have never attended High School, Mr. Robson?" I asked him.

"Yes, I did say that, because in those days children on 10 the farms were fortunate to get a common school education. At that time there were no [consolidated[?]] schools in the country and sometimes we would have to walk several miles to school. There were no such things as school busses in those days.

"I have noticed all through our conversation that your English is good and I know you write a beautiful hand." I told him.

"Well, it was this way. After I closed the store at night a friend of mine, who was also a merchant, allowed me to come to his place of business and he taught me for quite a while. That man wrote the prettiest hand I ever saw. Then when I secured a better job with another firm, the proprietor taught me practical bookkeeping, letting me learn by posting his books at night after closing hours. He would stay at the store and teach me, for which I was indeed grateful."

"I feel that the World War was the primary cause of the general economic depression. As soon as war was declared prices began to rise and when our country finally became involved, salaries increased and naturally, people had more money to spend. Those who didn't have the money, anticipated their wants and borrowed it. At that time the banks had ample money and were eager to lend it. People spent lavishly and wanted luxuries in addition to the necessities. Prices 11 soared and credit was easily obtained. While this period of inflation lasted everything went well, the rich became richer, and the poor had many things previously unknown to them.

"Then came deflation. The mother banks in New York [climbed[?]] down on the smaller ones, refusing to let them have any more money; they were unable to carry on and were forced to close their doors. Stocks and bonds hit rock bottom, prices took a drastic drop,

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businesses failed and then came the general depression. As a natural result many people lost their jobs.

“General Motors, the steel plants, automobile industries, the sugar market, Coco Cola, and even the pepper market suffered. When the market broke people had no money with which to meet their obligations and even many millionaires became paupers overnight.

“During the inflation period, cotton soared as high as 42¢ a pound. Those who had cotton anticipated 50¢ and held their cotton at these high figures, then when the market collapsed they lost everything they had.

“The small banks that had made loans to farmers and others suffered terrific losses and the majority of them were compelled to close.

“The government finally stopped in and took over the cotton situation. Farmers were allowed to plant only a 12 certain amount of cotton, and as a result many cotton factors were forced out of business.

“During the war when prices rose so high it was often necessary for merchants to contract for ahead. When the crash came we were loaded up on a great many commodities that we were forced to sell at a terrific loss.

“White meat that was bought for 32 and 35 ¢ was sold for as low as 12 ¢ and some of it for 4 and 5 ¢ per pound. Sugar was another commodity that brought heavy losses to grocery firms. Manufacturers held merchants to their contracts, forcing them to pay and in many instances brought suit against them.

“At one time we bought a lot of syrup for 35 ¢ a gallon and had to sell it for [17 1/2 [?]] ¢. At that we considered ourselves lucky to get half price for it, because later we found that it was fermented.

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“Another firm bought two carloads of corn about the same time. It was found to be [weevil[?]] eaten and instead of realizing a profit on the cost price of \$1.55 a bushel, they were glad to sell all of it for 55 ¢.

“Of course there were many contributing causes to the depression, but it is my firm belief that the World War was the main one/.

“And so, while it has left many [scars[?]], I still have much for which to be thankful.”